

**Testimony of the Connecticut Audubon Society to the Environment Committee
of the Connecticut General Assembly in strong support of H.B. No. 6484 An Act Concerning
Certain Harvesting of Horseshoe Crabs.**



January 27, 2023

The Connecticut Audubon Society thanks the Committee and the sponsors of **H.B. No. 6484 An Act Concerning Certain Harvesting of Horseshoe Crabs** for proposing this resolution and for the opportunity to express our strong support of this important measure.

The Connecticut Audubon Society strongly supports any effort to restore populations of horseshoe crabs in Long Island Sound. Connecticut needs to take decisive action to facilitate restoration of the crab population to its former abundance so that they can fulfill their functional role in our marine ecosystem. Increasing horseshoe crabs to carrying capacity is critical to the viability of the federally listed Red Knot (*Calidris canutus rufa*), other migratory shorebirds, sportfish, and forage fish that occur on the Sound.

The Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) manages the horseshoe crab stock from Maine to eastern Florida. In their most recent Benchmark Stock Assessment, ASMFC concluded the following regarding changes to the horseshoe crab population since 2009 in the New York region (which includes all of Long Island Sound). “The status has gone from good, to neutral, to poor. There is no mortality associated with biomedical collections in the New York region and bait harvest has been reduced from historic levels (...) Two hypotheses for the continued decline are: 1) bait harvest remains at a level that is not sustainable in the New York region; or 2) the habitat has changed and cannot support the number of horseshoe crabs it once did” (Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, 2019 Horseshoe Crab Benchmark Stock Assessment Non-Confidential Report, Page 84).

The Connecticut Audubon Society believes that closing the horseshoe crab fishery in Connecticut state waters is a prudent and appropriate response to these ASMFC findings. Horseshoe crabs are primarily harvested to be used as bait for the commercial American eel and whelk/conch fisheries. Eliminating bait harvest is the only available tool for addressing the ongoing decline in the crab population in the near term. Closure of the horseshoe crab bait fishery would be consistent with past actions taken by the state to conserve other severely declining species. For example, DEEP closed the bait fishery for river herring based on the argument that this was the only source of mortality that they had the ability to control. Closing the bait fishery for river herring was appropriate given their important ecological role as forage for many fish and wildlife species. Closing the bait fishery is equally appropriate for horseshoe crabs given the species’ essential role in our coastal ecosystem.

Connecticut has so far implemented harvest restrictions that prohibit hand-harvest on Milford Point, Sandy Point in West Haven, and Menunketesuck Island in Westbrook and recently the Town of Stratford included their beaches as a closed area. We strongly feel that because of the poor condition of the horseshoe crab population in our region and the inability of the population to recover under the current fishery regulations, the only remaining course of action is to invoke a moratorium on the harvest of horseshoe crabs and to ban the use of horseshoe crab as bait in Connecticut. Similar action should be implemented by the State of New York. We strongly support any efforts to restore populations of this critically important natural resource and eliminating the hand harvesting of horseshoe crabs will be an important step in our efforts to recover populations of this species and the ecosystem that depends on their presence.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input on this important matter.

Patrick M. Comins, Executive Director

The Connecticut Audubon Society protects Connecticut’s birds, other wildlife, and their habitats through conservation, education, and advocacy. We envision that our efforts will lead to a future where all can share and experience the joys of nature and understand the importance of environmental preservation. Founded in 1898, we operate nature facilities in Fairfield, Milford, Pomfret, Hampton, Sherman, the Greater Hartford Area and Old Lyme, and an EcoTravel office in Essex. We own and manage 22 preserves covering more than 3,400 acres in all areas of the state, and we work with landowners to help them manage their land for the benefit of birds and other wildlife.